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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0478
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS ANTANANARIVO 001016

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PARIS FOR D'ELIA
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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: Embassy's Third Annual Iftar Reception

¶1. The Ambassador and DCM hosted September 25 the Embassy's third annual Iftar reception in Antananarivo. Friends and contacts from Madagascar's diverse Muslim communities attended - Khoja, Sunni, Bohra, and Ismailis -- again expressing their appreciation for our hospitality. Interestingly, Madagascar's diverse Muslim groups rarely interact with each other, so the Iftar serves both to bring Muslim leaders together and into contact with the Embassy.

¶2. Although Muslims have a long history in Madagascar, they are used to being tolerated at best and neglected at worst. As a whole, including "foreigners" of Indo-Pakistani origin (some here for four generations) and Malagasy, Muslims represent 10 percent of the population. Our Iftar included the Comoran Ambassador, a Bohra businessman who founded a major school, an Embassy expeditor, and a Malagasy Imam with a theological degree from Cairo.

¶3. As in years past, attendees were surprised to hear in the DCM's speech that President Bush hosts an annual Iftar at the White House. Discussions at the tables often turned to curiosity about Muslim life in the United States. Embassy officers emphasized American values of tolerance and freedom of religion.

¶4. The Muslim's place in Malagasy society remains uncertain. Many Muslims of Indo-Pakistani origin control vast amounts of wealth, yet limit their investments in Madagascar because they lack legal status or protection. Another topic of discussion was President Ravalomanana's comments about wanting to create a "Christian state." The April Constitutional Referendum removed explicit separation of church and state, though no official religion was named.

MARQUARDT